Depot Town Rag

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November 2010

On the road again

100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

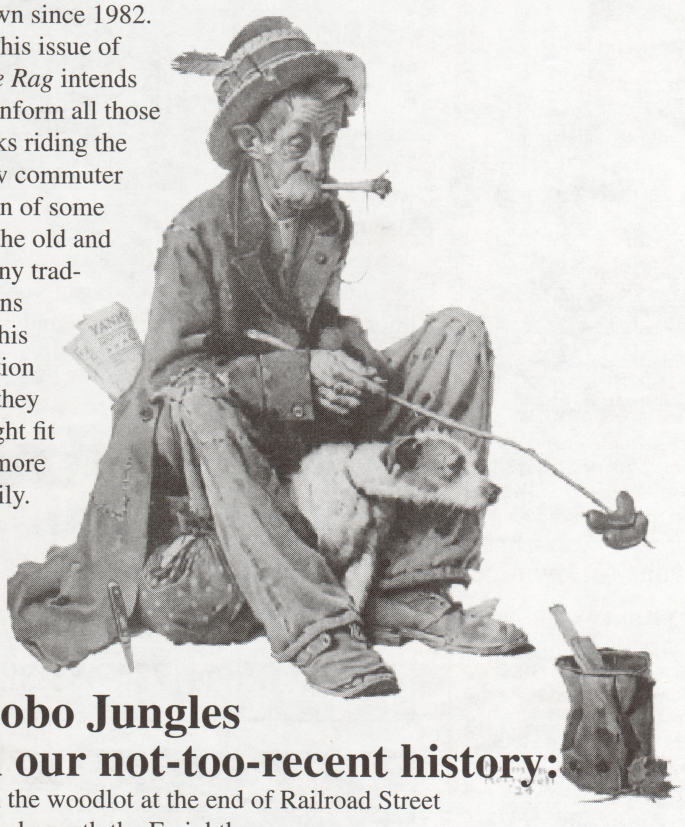
Who's up for nostalgia? It's not what it used to be

Just thirty years ago, the Depot Town Association sponsored an annual event called Boomer Days, remembering the hey-day of bums, tramps, and hobos in the rail yards of America. Kids and adults were encouraged to dress down like hobos for an anti-fashion show. Shop windows exhibited examples of Tramp Art, and there was a neighborhood cook-out featuring Mulligan Stew with such politically incorrect slogans as "first you steal a chicken." A neighborhood Hobo Jungle camp-out was held for one night on Frog Island where participants improvised shelters as the final event of the hobo theme.

Final, because it was discovered to be too close to the Real Hobo Jungle, this clever piece of neighborhood nostalgia didn't seem so clever any more. Campers realized that what they were doing for fun was the same thing others were doing by necessity.

There hasn't been another Boomer Days celebration in Depot Town since 1982.

This issue of *The Rag* intends to inform all those folks riding the new commuter train of some of the old and corny traditions at this station so they might fit in more easily.



Hobo Jungles in our not-too-recent history:

- In the woodlot at the end of Railroad Street
- Underneath the Freighthouse
- North of Forest Avenue, on the east bank of the Huron River
- Behind the Riverside Arts Center
- In the former Civil War barracks that was destroyed by fire in September 2009.

The long-awaited commuter train probably won't be this pretty

Commuter Train a bit behind schedule

American trains seldom run on time and the long-planned and hoped-for SEMCOG commuter is no exception. Anyone standing out by the tracks waiting for their ride to Metro Airport, Dearborn, or Detroit's New Center area may be waiting a little bit longer before they hear the whistle blowing on its way from Ann Arbor any morning soon.

Hobos, tramps, or bums? *-James Mann*

Just after the first railroad tracks were laid and tickets were sold to passengers, the railroads noticed not everyone riding the trains had paid. There were always those who sought a free ride. They sought a free ride not because they were cheap, but because the cost of a ticket was too high for them. The riders of the rails have been with us since the beginning of train service and are still with us today. They are known as the hobos.

The origin of the term hobo is unknown, but was first noticed in the 1890s. This was a time of a great depression, almost equal to the one of the 1930s. This was when many young men left their homes in search of work. Unable to find work in their own home town, young men left home and took to the rails, riding illegally in box cars and by other means from one place to another searching for work. The term may have come from the hoe some carried, signifying their willingness to work. On the hoe they would have their belongings wrapped in a bundle, called a bindle. At first these young men may have been called "hoe boys" which in time changed to hobo.

A hobo is someone who travels while looking for work, and is not to be confused with a tramp, who travels but never works unless forced to, or a bum, who never works or travels unless forced to.

A hobo village, called a "jungle," was to be found near every community, including Ypsilanti, *[continued overleaf]*

"Boomer" bust is part of our block's history

[from the Depot Town Rag, June 1980]

First "Boomer Days" a huge success

Newspapers estimated over two thousand folks attended the May 31st Farmer's Market grand opening and DTA Caboose dedication. The Association thanks its loyal supporters and these workers in particular:

• Lynn Radtke, for exhibiting her great collection of Tramp Art. It drew raves all through the week and one Belleville family recognized a recent ancestor in a Tramp Art-framed wedding portrait. It was one of the few times such folk art could be traced to its source.

• To Jack Miller for the use of his showroom for half the Tramp Art show.

• To Mary Liskow for preparing and serving the unique and tasty Mulligan Stew to the multitude of boomers.

• To John Waite for maintaining a safe and happy hobo jungle on Frog Island throughout a stormy weekend—and for staffing the Caboose all through its dedication weekend.

• To Frank Leimbach for officiating at the dedication event with Mayor Goodman, State Representative Gary Owen, Congressman Carl Pursell, and Frank Jones from the Department of the Interior.

• To Bob Fox for leading six different bike tours of the historic sites along the Huron River.

• To the many "Boomers" who dressed down and paraded from the Water Tower to the sanctuary of Depot Town.

• And to the many others who worked for the Association in the preparation and execution of Depot Town's first Boomer Days.

Hobos, tramps, & bums

[continued from page one]

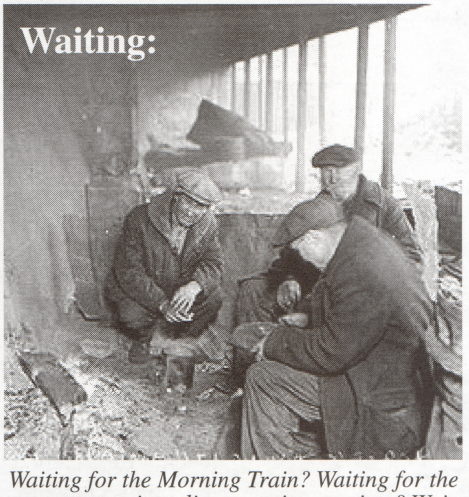
where hobos lived in makeshift shanties, constructed from whatever was on hand: discarded blankets, wood, shipping crates, and so on. In these villages the hobos would cook their Mulligan stew, sing their songs and tell their stories. When the time came for them to leave, they would "hop a freight" and go someplace else.

The life of a hobo is dangerous, as many fell under the wheels of the moving trains and were injured or killed. Some froze to death in unheated cars during the cold winter months, and others died when criminals, including hobos, sought what money or valuables they possessed.

The ranks of the hobos have included Jack Dempsey, Woody Guthrie, Eric Hoffer, Burl Ives, Jack Kerouac, Jack London, James Michener, Robert Mitchum, Eugene O'Neill, George Orwell and John Steinbeck. For some the life of a hobo was a desperate act, a way to find a better life; for others it was a desired lifestyle, one of freedom.

In either case, the hobo is still with us, and may always be.

[Mann's new book, "Wicked Washtenaw County," is availble in bookstores and at the Ypsilanti Historical Museum. $19.99 History Press]



Waiting for the Morning Train? Waiting for the commuter train to live up to its promises? Waiting for the Freighthouse to open up? Waiting for a job somewhere in Michigan?

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Boomer rebirth flops

A neighborhood committee tried to ressurrect similar Boomer Days events with a "Hobo Dinner Dance" on 5 November 1995, with a special "Peek into the Mystery of Hobo History" by Peter B. Fletcher. Promotions announced Hobo or Country attire appreciated, square dancing, line dancing, and other entertainments in the Freighthouse. Alas, it never came together; some suspect the planners might have jumped the east-bound train.

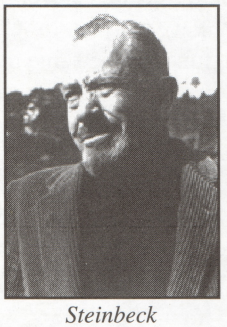
DISCLAIMER

Local Boomer wasn't here

During all the 1980s hoopla over bums, tramps, and hobos in Depot Town, former City Assessor, Carole Clare, was serving as tax assessor up in Oakland County.

The Boomer Days events in Depot Town in the Eighties were not named for her family. The former Ypsilanti City Assessor's maiden name: Carole Boomer.

"Romance of the Rails" myth still persists



Steinbeck

John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath,* may have helped to romanticize hitching rides on trains, begging for food, and sleeping under the stars but, as the economy worsened in today's Depot Town and at depots across the country, dressing down like bums and neighborhood camp-outs in improvised (but sanitary) hobo jungles became an embarrassment to most potential participants.

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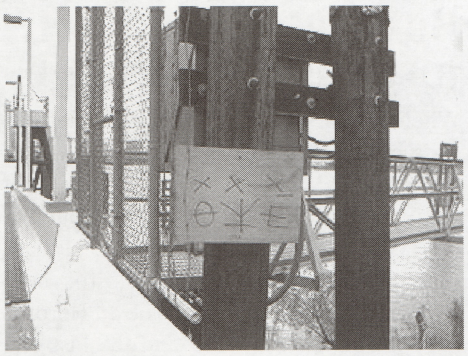
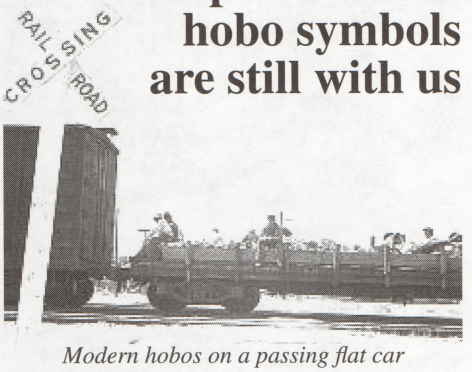


Traditional hobo symbols posted on a Canal Street bridge in New Orleans, LA, in 2000.

Depression-era hobo symbols are still with us



Modern hobos on a passing flat car

Mulligan Stew recipe on page five

Ten Things You Need to Know to Live on the Streets

Conceived by Walter Mosley with research by Rae Gomes and reprinted with permission from The Nation magazine, August 3/10, 2009

For millions of Americans the housing crisis began well before last year's front-page collapse. Bigotry and criminalization by an unjust system of policing and incarceration, combined with economic privation, have kept even the meager privilege of a subprime mortgage or slumlord lease out of reach for many. As the crisis unfolds, the number of homeless will grow.

Picture the Homeless, a social justice organization founded and led by homeless people in NYC, has joined The Nation to come up with a list of things you need to know to live on the street—and ways we can all build movements to challenge the stigma of homelessness and put forward an alternative vision of community.

1. Be prepared to be blamed for your circumstances, no matter how much they may be beyond your control. Think of ways to disabuse the public of common misconceptions. Don't internalize cruelty or condescension. Let go of your pride—but hold on to your dignity.

2. There is no private space to which you may retreat. You are on display 24/7. Learn to travel light. Store valuables in a safe place, only carrying around what you really need: ID and documents for accessing services, a pen, etc. You can check e-mail and read at the library. You can get a post office box for a fee or use general delivery (free).

3. Learn the best bathroom options, where you won't be rushed, turned away or harassed. Find restrooms where it's clean enough to put your stuff down, the stalls are big enough to change in, and there's hot water so you can wash up.

4. It's difficult to have much control over when, where, and what you eat, so learn soup kitchen schedules and menus. Carry with you nuts, peanut butter, or other foods high in protein. Go to 4homeless.hypermart.net/soup_kitchen.tmlly to find a list of soup kitchens by state.

5. Food and clothing are easier to find than a safe place to sleep—the first truth of homelessness is sleep deprivation. Always have a blanket. Whenever possible, sleep in groups with staggered schedules, so you can look out for one another, prioritizing children's needs over those of adults.

6. Know your rights! Knowing constitution amendments, legal precedents, and human rights provisions can help you, even if they're routinely violated. In New York, for example, a 2003 court-ordered settlement strictly forbids selective enforcement of the law against the homeless. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement offers another resource, and the ACLU has cards, brochures, fact sheets, and films.

7. Learn police patterns and practices. Be polite and calm to cops, even when they don't give the same respect. Support initiatives demanding independent police accountability. Link with groups from overlapping populations of nonhomeless and homeless people (i.e. black, Latino, LGBT groups) that are fighting police brutality and building non-police safety projects, like the Audre Lorde Project's Safe OUTside the System in Brooklyn. Organize your own --CopWatch-—and photograph, videotape, and publicize instances of police abuse.

8. The First Amendment protects your right to solicit aid (panhandling), especially if your pitch or sign is a statement rather than a request. To succeed, be creative, funny, engaging ("I didn't get a bailout!"). Find good, high-traffic spots where the police won't bother you.

9. Housing is a human right! Squat. Forge coalitions with nonhomeless but potentially displaced people in this era of mass foreclosures. Support United Workers in Baltimore, the Coalition on Homelessness in San Francisco, the Nashville Homeless Power Project. Learn about campaigns against homelessness in other nations, including the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil and the Anti-Eviction Campaign in South Africa.

10. Don't go it alone! Always be part of an informal network of trust and mutual aid. Start your own organization, with homeless people themselves shaping the fight for a better life and world.

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We're still working on that same old railroad

At the A2 depot: Amtrak's Wolverine is a passenger train service operated by Amtrak as part of its Michigan Services. The 304-mile provides three daily round-trips along the Pontiac-Detroit-Ypsilanti-Ann Arbor-Chicago route. It is served by three eastbound and three westbound trains.

On November 26, 2008, former Federal Railroad Administration chairman Joseph H. Boardman was appointed interim Amtrak President and CEO

Joe Boardman, new Amtrak president, declares war on dead-end bureaucrats

In a revealing news story from *Trains Newswire*, Boardman described Amtrak as being "in worse shape than he thought" and full of hopeless clock-watchers. But he promised that change is on the way. Some key points from the piece:

• Lots of burned out bureaucrats at Amtrak. He refers to them as "people who don't believe."

• Look forward to a firing spree. "Boardman says [any] Amtrak managers… who cannot make the transition from a survival mode to a growth mode will have to find another job."

• The previous management, despite the fact that traffic was up 12 percent last year, didn't order any regular passenger cars as part of their five-year plan. For some reason they just asked for odds and ends like "baggage dormitory cars."

• That five-year plan was, for some reason, "secret."

• Despite being a secret, this five-year plan also was "a joke" at Amtrak headquarters.

• This lack of passenger cars leaves Amtrak in "horrible" shape for America's new golden era of passenger rail, according to Boardman.

• Everybody loves Boardman — congressmen and railroad conductors alike.

• He has put in a request for $1 billion in government loans to buy electric locomotives.

• Boardman uses "trainspeak" in his metaphors: "People are going to have to get on the train. We will make some judgments very soon."

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In the next *Rag*:

Our final issue will feature the famed Hutchinson House —a good place to know about if AnnArbor should ever attack.

Depot Town Rag

"All the news that fits, we print"
A monthly publication of
the Depot Town Association, Inc.
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The Depot Town Association, Inc.

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Michelle Shankwiler, Vice President
Ruth Ann Jamnick, Treasurer
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Website: www.depottown.org
DTA meets at 6:30 p.m on the third Wednesday of each month at Café Luwak, 42 East Cross Street.

Mulligan Stew Recipe

First, you steal one chicken...

Ingredients

Forget about that chicken. An abundance of vegetables cooked in the juices of beef brisket and beef make this a tasty and savory stew.

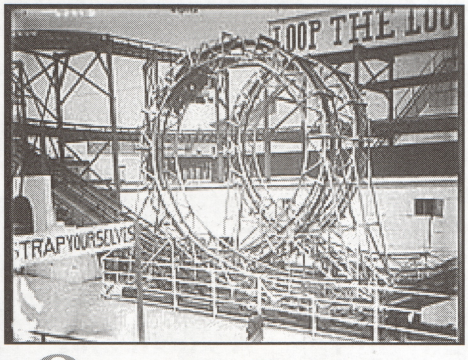
Directions

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1 pound beef brisket, cut into 1" cubes
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 onion, chopped
8 ounces fresh mushrooms, sliced
6 cloves garlic, finely diced
6 ounces tomato paste
2 cups beef broth
12 ounces stout beer
6 large carrots, peeled and cut into 1" chunks
2 large potatoes, peeled and cut into 1" chunks
2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped
THICKENING AGENT (if needed):
1 tablespoon corn starch
1 tablespoon cold water

Servings: 6
Container:
large heavy skillet or dutch oven
Prep Time: 30 minutes
Cook Time: 1 hour

Traffic-calming loop could replace crossing gates at the RR tracks

Innovative traffic installation to facilitate at Depot Town's main corner



Traffic loops in history:

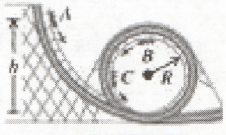
Big deal. Traffic circles are nothing new. We had one down by the depot more than a hundred years ago. Get over it.

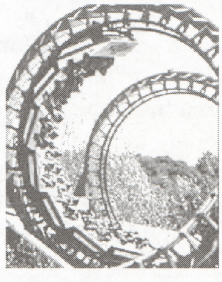
Top: Engineers did not allow for wide loads on the trains with their initial installation.

Bottom: The second MCRR Loop permitted through traffic on Cross and River Streets while trains passed through.

Over and out!

How to use the new traffic loop:





(See diagram right)

A. Maintain legal city speed limits

B. Do not accelerate at top of loop

C. Do not hang out car windows

R. Please, no more pictures!

Traffic circle to eliminate waiting for trains

Getting looped down by the depot

Depot Town's new traffic pattern should be installed by the end of 2011, say officials from the DTCDC, but it's not the first time a loop has been seen here. The 1913 installation worked just fine until the train came through with a wide load that year. "It was fun while it lasted," remembers Fenton Farquhar, who says his grandfather used to work on the railroad. "We liked to coast down the hill from Prospect Park on our bikes, hit the loop, and then careen across the river and up the hill to The Normal School. If the wind was right, you could make it to the Water Tower without pedaling. Then we'd try to make it back, but..." [Farquhar's story may be continued next month.]

The new "Loop" may prove to be a huge improvement over contemporary installations of roundabouts, traffic circles, and merry-go-rounds at other locations in and around Washtenaw County. Brighton's triple traffic circle is likely to make the record books.

The crux of East Cross and North River Streets is made more complex than other crossings with the addition of the railroad track at the intersection, say traffic experts. "The Loop" will permit surface traffic to continue through the intersection in any direction––even when a freight train is passing through.

Community reaction:

Computer Analyst: "Are they going to make us add guard rails now, like they did on the Cross Street

Local Bartender: "First we got rid of the smoking; now we can look forward to no exhaust fumes either. Hey! This place is starting to smell great!"

Spot Welder: "This sure beats going all the way to Cedar Point for family fun!"

Navel Inspector: "So, if we can afford to fix the Freighhouse, why can't we build a bigger one of these on I-94 to avoid Ann Arbor?"

A flash from the past

Depot Town Association's 1976 logotype seemed a divergence from the usual straight-shot style of laying track. Most model train sets could not even negotiate such a sharp turn, let alone an over-head loop! But the tradition of hyperbole persists in the neighborhood.

Not wealthy enouigh to tear it all down and make a strip mall out of their neighborhhod, Depot Towners decided to make a silk purse out of the sow's ear-block they found themselves in together.

All things railroad-connected came into play to establish what eventualy came to be known as the "Depot Town brand." While other towns seemed embarrassed at their proximity to the "other side of the tracks," these folks reveled in such association. They wore engineer's caps, blew train whistles, and sang songs about Casey Jones. They wallowed in coal dust and acted like they enjoyed it.

And it worked. Welcome to the depot!

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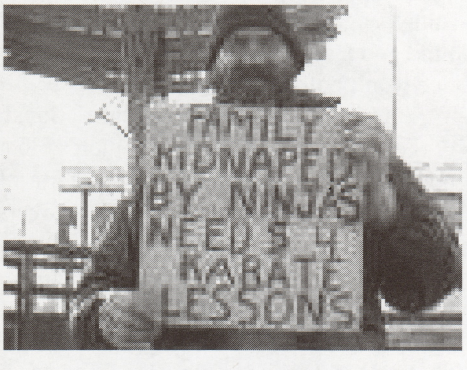
Oops! We missed the Hobo Fest last month

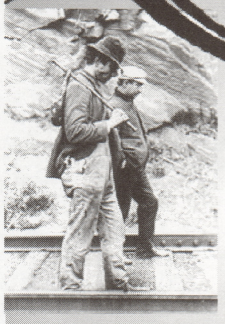
October 9th was the day to celebrate the 18th Laurel Hill, Florida Hobo Festival with live entertainment, an assortment of music from gospel to country, and more than 50 local vendors at the Gene Clary Park on New Ebenezer Road (State Road 85A).

Lacking such culture as Heritage, Elvis, vintage autos, home-brewed beers, or hillbillies, Laurel Hill's first Hobo Festival was held in 1992. It has continued annually except in 1995 when it was cancelled because of Hurricane Opal.

How long might it take to travel from Ypsilanti to Laurel Hill in an empty box car? We ought to make it by October 2011.



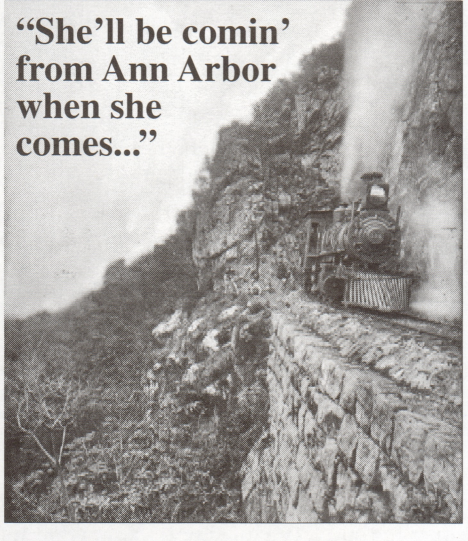
RAGTIME Coming events



Watch for that Commuter Train. It's sure to come around the bend any time now...

Thanks to the many pianists who played along with us here and in the downtown district last month. Music filled the streets! Let's do it again!

"She'll be comin' from Ann Arbor when she comes..."

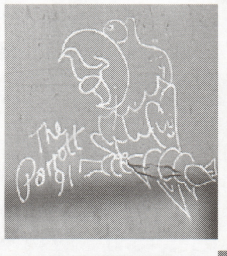


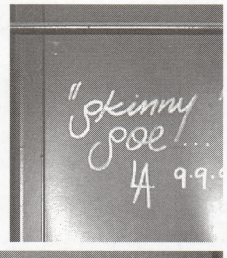
Box Car Tramp Art: just passing through

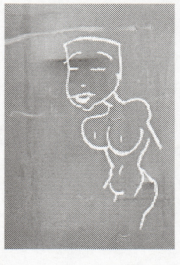
When was the last time you saw a "Herbie" slide by as you enjoyed your lunch out on the sidewalk? Legend had it that a railroad employee by that name liked to put his chalked logo on box cars where he worked in St. Louis, MO and then watch for them all over the country. The earliest "Herbie" documented was in 1969 and the last one seen moving through Depot Town was in early 1980.

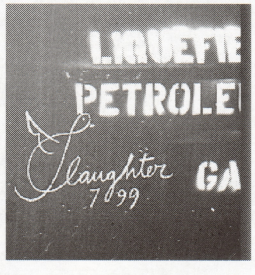
This recent survey of "box car art" indicates today's throw-ups are less creative.

"Thunderstorm" seems mildly depressed, probably wishing he had never left home in the first place. "Skinny Joe" and "Slaughter" had little say about their condition, other than the date. The unsigned works reveal little about their artists other than some lonesome and wishful thinking.









Recent throw-ups on freight cars seem to lack the spontaneous creativity seen in the past.

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